NATURE'S INDIFFERENCE

It is often supposed that natural entities such as mountains and rivers are of value despite their indifference to our interests. This paper has the following aims: (1) to clarify what it means to say that nature is indifferent in the relevant sense; (2) to contend, against critics such as Hans Jonas and Val Plumwood, that much of nature really is so indifferent; (3) to propose that nature can be – and sometimes is - of value, not despite, but because of its indifference to our interests.

Why is the Grand Canyon of value? Various answers might come to mind. One might think that it has some sort of intrinsic value. One might point to the place's cultural significance or to the fact that it provides a home for so many living creatures. If one believes that the canyon is natural and one agrees with Robert Elliot that that property is 'always value-adding', then one might cite its naturalness.[1] But should the canyon's inability to care about us and what matters to us appear on one's list of value-adding properties? It is hard to see why it should. It is difficult to see why the mere fact that something is indifferent to us should add to its value.[2] Indeed, some believe that that sort of indifference is a value-*subtracting* property. In *The Wild and the Wicked*, for instance, Benjamin Hale draws attention to nature's indifference to 'the plight of humanity' in an effort to convince his readers that nature has less value than nature lovers suppose.[3] Nature is not, he claims, 'something we should adore'.[4] It 'acts according to law, to instinct, to need', and functions 'according to laws entirely indifferent to the concerns of humans.'[5] For Hale, as I suspect for many people, nature's indifference to our interests is intrinsically a bad thing, a 'disvalue'.

In the following, I challenge this view. I begin by clarifying what it means to say that nature is indifferent to our interests, before moving on, in sections 2 and 3, to consider how the indifference of those entities conventionally (though contentiously) referred to as 'natural' is supposed to differ from that of human artefacts. In Section 4, I contend, against critics such as Hans Jonas and Val

Plumwood, that much of nature really is indifferent to our interests. In sections 5 and 6, I draw on work in the fields of psychology and the phenomenology of religion to argue that nature can be of value, not despite, but *because* of its indifference to our interests. I end by suggesting that, for many inhabitants of post-industrial societies, some natural entities really do have value because of their indifference to our interests.

1. Clarifications

If theism is true, then perhaps God cares not just about us but about some of the things that matter to us. But if we restrict our view to the non-supernatural realm, indifference seems to be the rule. Aside from us human beings and some of the animals we have domesticated, most entities don't give a damn about us or what matters to us. For the most part, nature is neither a nurturing mother nor, as the biologist George Simpson once suggested, a 'wicked witch'.[6] It simply doesn't care either way.

I will give a more precise account of what it means to be indifferent to our interests below, but for now let us suppose that to say that x is indifferent in this sense is to say that it does not care about any human interests. 'Care' here should be understood in a broad sense as encompassing any sort of preference, not just those that are accompanied by 'warm' emotions such as love and compassion. So, on this reading of 'care', someone who doesn't feel anything for sweatshop workers but thinks that justice nonetheless demands an end to their exploitation *cares* about sweatshop workers. 'Interests' should also be understood in a broad sense. To say that something is indifferent to human interests is to say that it does not care about what interests us humans or about what is objectively in our interests.[7]

What does it mean to claim that *nature* is indifferent in this sense? Such claims can be interpreted in various ways, depending on what one means by 'nature'.

Those who claim that nature is indifferent might, for instance, be using the word 'nature' to denote a category of entities. That is to say, they might mean to suggest that everything that is natural – in some specific sense of 'natural' – is indifferent to our interests. If 'nature' is construed in a very broad way, if, for instance, it is taken to denote everything that is not supernatural, then such claims are hard to accept since there exist some apparently non-supernatural entities - namely us human beings – who are not indifferent to human interests. In light of this, one might be charitable and interpret claims that nature (in the relevant very broad sense) is indifferent to our interests as claims that *most* natural entities are so indifferent. Alternatively, one might opt for some narrower conception of nature, according to which *all* those entities that count as natural are indifferent to our interests. I suspect it would prove very difficult to identify any plausible conception of nature that meets these requirements, though. For example, suppose that one stipulates that an entity counts as natural if and only if its current state is for the most part not the intended product of human actions. It would prove difficult to justify the claim that all those entities that are natural in this sense are indifferent to our interests. Loyal pet wolves would provide one putative counterexample.

When people claim that nature is indifferent to our interests, they do not, however, always use 'nature' to refer to a category of entities. They sometimes take the word to denote some *agent* which is supposed to be indifferent to our interests.

One might worry, with William Hasker, that to do this would be 'to indulge in the pathetic fallacy'.[8] This is not a decisive objection, however. Claims that nature is cruel are, it is true, likely to encourage the notion that nature as a whole is some sort of malevolent agent. Yet claims that it is indifferent are meant to put such anthropomorphic fantasies to rest. If any sort of personification is involved, then it is a self-effacing sort of personification. And in fact, those writers who, in unguarded moments, risk personifying nature are often quick to qualify the offending claims. For instance, though, as we saw, Hale claims that 'Nature just acts according to law, to instinct, to need', he takes care, a dozen or so pages further on, to disavow any anthropomorphism:

> It is a curious fact about the English vernacular that we refer to events like the Boxing Day tsunami as *acts of nature*. This is fantastically misleading. Tsunamis are no more *acts* than the whirring of your computer's hard drive is an act.[9]

In some cases – and this is a third option – those who speak of nature's indifference are conceiving of nature as a set of *laws*. These laws are thought to be, in various respects, nonhuman. They were not instituted by human beings, and they are not, nor have ever been, enforced by them. Moreover, they swing free of considerations pertaining to goodness, virtue or justice.

To conceive of nature in any of these three ways - as a category, as some sort of agent or as a set of laws - is to think of it in general terms. It is to think of nature with a capital 'n'. Yet those who conceive of nature in this way sometimes seek to support their claims that it is indifferent to our interests by referring to *particular* entities which they take to be natural. Take Hurricane Wilma, for instance.[10] Someone who holds that everything that has the property of naturalness is indifferent to our interests might point to Hurricane Wilma as one example of a natural entity which is so indifferent. Someone who holds that there exists some agent, Nature, which rolls on heedless of our interests may claim that that agent's indifference is symbolised or in some other way evinced by the indifference of the hurricane. Someone who takes 'nature' to denote a set of laws might say that Hurricane Wilma is the result of those laws governing how events unfold in a certain situation.

So people sometimes speak not just of the indifference of nature in general, but of the indifference of particular putatively natural entities. It is important, however, to note that not all such entities are indifferent to our interests in the same way.

Consider the following remarks from Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*:

> The finest quality of this stone, these plants and animals, this desert landscape is the indifference manifest to our presence, our absence, our coming, our staying or our going. Whether we live or die is a matter of absolutely no concern whatsoever to the desert.[11]

Abbey's desert is incapable of caring about anything. But now imagine that you are standing in that desert, watching a vulture circling overhead. Although the vulture no doubt cares about some things – food, water, the well-being of its chicks – and although it may care about *you* (as potential carrion, or whatever), it is indifferent to your interests. I will express this by saying that it does not *intrinsically care* whether any of your interests are satisfied. Granted, you may share some basic interests – in eating, for instance - with it. Moreover, the vulture may care how your satisfying your interests could bear upon its efforts to secure one or more of its own ends. Perhaps, for instance, the vulture cares about your efforts to find water, but only because it stands to gain if those efforts come to nothing. But it does not intrinsically care whether or not you satisfy your interests, either because it is unaware of your interests or because it is aware of them but simply does not care whether they are satisfied.[12]

Enough has, I think, now been said to allow us to distinguish two ways of reading claims that nature is indifferent. To say that nature (or whichever part of it we are considering) is indifferent in a *strong* sense is to say that it is incapable of caring about anything's interests.[13] The hurricane and the desert are in this sense indifferent to our interests, as is nature writ large (regardless of whether it is conceived of as a category, an agent or a set of laws). To say that nature (or whichever part of it we are considering) is indifferent to x's interests in a *weak* sense is merely to say that it does not intrinsically care about x's interests. The hurricane, the desert and nature writ large are all indifferent to our interests in this sense. But so is the vulture.[14]

2. Nature's hostility

In seeking to convey nature's indifference I have followed convention by citing examples of entities that are natural in the sense of being largely unshaped by human intentions – hurricanes, deserts, vultures and so forth.[15] But this presents a puzzle. Take Abbey's desert. When Abbey maintains that the desert is indifferent, he means to draw attention to a *difference* between the desert and such entities as dining rooms, shopping malls and air-conditioned hotel foyers. Yet no such entities intrinsically care whether we humans satisfy our interests. The dining room, shopping mall and hotel foyer are, like the desert, strongly indifferent to our interests. So why the focus on such things as hurricanes and deserts?

To answer this question, one must consider what an entity must be *like* if its indifference to our interests is to become apparent. One is, I propose, more likely to recognise that x is indifferent to one's interests if x either opposes one's interests or seems likely to oppose them. Suppose that x is a tall man who is blocking my view of some spectacle. I ask the fellow to move aside and he doesn't respond. His lack of response indicates to me that he is indifferent to my interests. If, by contrast, x had moved aside after I had asked him to, then it is unlikely that I would have seen him as indifferent – and this would have remained the case even if he was in fact indifferent to my interests and had stepped aside simply because he himself wanted a better view.

Similarly, people are more inclined to regard nature as indifferent when it *thwarts* their interests. (This explains why the phrase 'nature's indifference' is apt to call to mind natural *disasters* brought about by such things as tornadoes and earthquakes.) The desert's indifference is what (taking my cue from Abbey) I shall call *manifest* because the landscape is so obviously inimical to human life. Ditto such things as stormy seas and wind-blasted mountain passes. The same could not, however, be said of the hotel foyer, precisely because the place – the lighting, the gentle mood music, the comfy sofas, the pleasant air temperature - is shaped to satisfy certain human interests. So although the foyer cares just as little about our interests as, say, the desert, its indifference isn't so obvious. Its indifference is not manifest.

I do not claim to be identifying necessary and sufficient conditions here. I do not mean to suggest that something that is manifestly indifferent must be prone to thwart our interests. (I give some examples of manifestly indifferent things that do not thwart our interests in the next section.) Nor do I mean to imply that it is only natural things that are so prone. The indifference of a reservoir could be manifest, as could that of a brutalist building, such as Trellick Tower in London.[16]

Manifest indifference is to some degree subject-dependent. Like most people, I tend to see deserts as being inimical to human life and thus as manifestly indifferent to our all-too-human interests. Yet someone who had grown up in a desert might not regard the place as manifestly indifferent. Perhaps, on the contrary, she would see its contents as ministering to her interests. That cactus, she might see as a source of water; that outcrop, as potential shelter – and so forth.

Be that as it may, any rational being, regardless of species, cultural background, etc, would surely regard *some* parts of nature as manifestly indifferent to their interests. The desert-dweller may be at home in the desert; but she will feel that other environments – marshes or forests or whatever – are manifestly indifferent. And even if some super-resourceful person, like TV personality and virtuoso backwoodsman Ray Mears, is at home pretty much anywhere, he can always turn his eyes to the night sky and reflect on the cold depths of space.

3. Nature's independence

In *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, Belden Lane has much to say about the indifference of deserts and mountains. As the title of his book indicates, he takes that indifference to be evident in the 'ferocity' of those landscapes – the fact that they tend to thwart rather than further our interests. In some passages, though, he gestures towards a different view. At one point, for example, he writes that the indifference of the Sinai Desert is manifested, not just in the place's apparent hostility to human life, but also in its great age. Of the Desert Fathers, he writes that 'The ancient desert had persisted for eons prior to their coming and would continue long after their death.'[17] The implication

is that the desert's indifference is manifest, not just in its 'ferocity', but also in its ontological independence from us.

Terence Malick's film *The Thin Red Line* provides another example of how nature's indifference can be manifest in something other than its apparent hostility to us. The film is about the Battle of Mount Austen, one episode in the Pacific War of World War II. As one would expect, it contains a lot of violence. Yet the scenes of violence are interspersed by other, very different images - a coconut lying on a beach, sunlight streaming through a forest canopy, a crocodile slipping into a swamp, stormclouds boiling over a line of trees. As Simon Critchley notes, these images evince 'nature's indifference': they convey to the viewer a sense that nature carries on 'regardless of our strivings.'[18] Here, again, we find nature's indifference manifested in its apparent independence from us.

It seems, then, that there are at least two ways that nature's indifference can be manifest. It can be manifest when the entity in question is apparently inimical to our interests. But it can also be manifest when the entity does not seem to depend for its existence on us.

Here, again, a rough distinction may be drawn between how we perceive the indifference of natural entities and how we perceive the indifference of human artefacts. To return to our earlier example, the hotel foyer might be every bit as indifferent to our interests as is the desert. But its indifference is un-manifest, not simply because it so obviously serves certain human interests, but also because it is clear that the foyer would not continue to exist if humans ceased to maintain it. If the cleaners stopped cleaning and the repairers stopped repairing – if no one continued to maintain the place, then it would cease to function as a foyer and, indeed, eventually crumble to dust.[19]

4. Three objections

A brief recap. To say that nature (or some part of it) is indifferent in a *strong* sense is to say that it is incapable of caring whether or not any of us humans satisfy our interests. To say that nature is

indifferent in a *weak* sense is merely to say that it does not intrinsically care whether any of us satisfy our interests. Both natural entities (such as deserts) and human artefacts (such as hotel foyers) can be strongly indifferent; however, the indifference of the former tends more often to be manifest. So there are four options. The strong indifference of some entities is manifest, while that of others is not manifest. The weak indifference of some entities can be manifest (the circling vulture would be one example), while that of other entities is not manifest. (Think of a pet lizard curling up on one's lap, solely in order to absorb the heat of one's body. The animal may be weakly indifferent to one's interests, even though, because it *seems* both so hospitable and so dependent on one's care, its indifference is not manifest.)

I have suggested that much of nature is strongly indifferent. Not everyone would agree. Some find in nature what Thoreau once called 'an infinite and unaccountable friendliness'.[20] But what *arguments* can be marshalled against the claim that nature is indifferent? In this section, I consider three.

Argument 1

Holmes Rolston III maintains that 'Nature is not all ferocity and indifference. She is also the bosom out of which we have come, and she remains our life partner…'[21]

The implied argument is that nature is not wholly indifferent to our interests because it both generated and continues to support human life. But to make that argument is to take 'indifferent to x' to entail something like 'neither generates nor supports the existence of x', and that implies a nonstandard interpretation of 'indifference'. It is more plausible to suggest that human life arose from what David Benatar calls 'blind evolutionary forces that are indifferent to us.'[22] Likewise, it is more plausible to think that the natural processes that continue, directly or indirectly, to support human life, such as photosynthesis, care nothing at all about human interests. In sum, then, Rolston's claims may affect how some people regard nature. Aware that it is the bosom out of which

we have come and our life partner, they may cease to regard it as *manifestly* indifferent to our interests. Be that as it may, Rolston has not disproved the claim that nature is indifferent in the sense of 'indifference' spelt out above.

Argument 2

Several writers have suggested that claims to the effect that nature is indifferent presuppose a discredited metaphysical dualism. Such claims are, one reads, 'a remnant from a dualistic metaphysics'.[23] They presuppose 'radical dualisms of mind and body, humanity and nature and… ignore the serious conceptual problems posed by such dualisms.'[24] To claim that nature is indifferent is to betray one's allegiance to 'the Cartesian model of a natural world "out there" as an object to our manipulating subject'.[25] It is to reaffirm 'the Western tradition of denying nature and the radical distancing between humans and nature an environmental ethic must aim to counter.'[26]

Such objections are not convincing. No matter how unfashionable the view is, one shouldn't simply dismiss substance dualism out of hand.[27] And anyway, even if no form of substance dualism is tenable, it is a further question whether the mere claim that nature is indifferent to our interests presupposes any such view. In fact it does not.

To be sure, claims to the effect that nature is indifferent to our interests imply some sort of *distinction* between human beings and nature, but Jonas et al. are wrong to assume that that distinction must amount to a *dualism*. After all, not all distinctions amount to dualisms, since a distinction may legitimately be made between two items that are very much alike. (Think of the distinction between one woman and her identical twin, for instance.) And, indeed, the claim that nature is indifferent is consistent with various non-dualistic views.

The views of Jacques Monod provide one example. Monod is no substance dualist: he's a materialist monist.[28] He does not denigrate nature by claiming that we humans are the only entities that have purpose and value. He maintains that human beings are ultimately purposeless

mechanisms. So when he suggests that man lives in an 'alien world, a world that is deaf to his music, and as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his sufferings and his crimes', he takes 'world' to refer to concrete reality as a whole, human beings included.[29] Whatever its faults, his position is not dualistic.

Argument 3

In response to this observation, the critic could revise her objection. She could concede that claims to the effect that nature is indifferent to our interests do not necessarily presuppose substance dualism. Yet she could maintain that they *do* necessarily presuppose a *disenchanted* conception of nature. To suppose that nature is indifferent to our interests is, she might say, to presuppose that it is a cold and uninteresting Monodian place, made up of 'inert, lifeless items', bereft of their 'own purposes'.[30] This view, she might add, ought not to be accepted – not simply because it is false, but also because it could be used to license the exploitation of nature. (Kerridge, for instance, worries about the 'convenient' assumption 'that if nature is indifferent, we should be indifferent in return.')[31] And if we must reject the claim that nature is disenchanted, then – the critic concludes - we must also reject claims that it is indifferent to our interests.

There is something to this objection. Given our intellectual history, claims about nature's indifference may well call to mind the notion that nature is thoroughly disenchanted – in effect, dead, like a corpse. And, although I won't argue the point here, I agree that that notion is implausible. However – and here's the rub - there's no *entailment* here, for one could endorse a thoroughly non-mechanistic 'undisenchanted' view of nature and yet consistently hold that much of nature is at least *weakly* indifferent to our interests. For instance, an animist could consistently hold that mountains are both (a) sentient and (b) weakly indifferent to our interests. This would be to hold that although mountains care about some things, they do not intrinsically care whether or not

we humans satisfy our interests. Whatever its faults, that animistic view does not portray nature as disenchanted.

5. Unselfing

Some of those who claim that nature is indifferent do so in order to disparage nature – to portray it as a disenchanted realm. But others use such claims to achieve a very different effect. Some hold that it can, in certain circumstances, be a good thing that nature is indifferent to our interests.

Christian theology provides one example. That intellectual tradition might, I admit, seem an unpromising place to look for praise of nature's indifference; for many philosophers of religion regard nature's indifference as evidence that God does not exist – one component of the problem of 'natural evil'. But there are countervailing tendencies within the tradition. Lane's *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* provides one example. In that book, Lane argues that living in harsh landscapes such as deserts can foster certain valuable religious attitudes and beliefs. For the desert fathers, he writes, the 'grand indifference of limestone crags and wormwood served as an effective antidote to all delusions of self-importance.'[32] The 'austere, unaccommodating landscapes of desert, mountain and heath recall… the smallness of self and the majesty of Being'.[33]

Though Lane writes of nature's indifference, he does not do so in order to disparage nature. He does not portray it as a disenchanted realm, for instance. Instead, he claims that encounters with nature's manifest indifference can prompt us to turn our eyes away from ourselves and our all-too-human concerns – to 'unself', to use Iris Murdoch's term.[34] Lane does not claim that such encounters *must* have this effect, nor even that they *tend* to have it. (Such claims would need to be supported by empirical research.) He merely suggests that they *can*, in some cases, prompt unselfing.

Yet even that cautious suggestion will make some uneasy. In 'The Human Prejudice', Bernard Williams criticises attempts to belittle human interests *tout court* by suggesting that they count for nothing from the perspective of the cosmos, and he might, one imagines, have had similar concerns

about claims that encounters with nature's indifference can prompt one to reassess the value of our 'merely human' projects.[35] Not everyone finds this line of criticism persuasive; however, even if Williams's objections to talk of the cosmos's perspective are well taken, they do not militate against Lane's suggestions.[36] For Lane does not write of the manifest indifference of fierce landscapes in order to belittle human interests *tout court*. His point, rather, is that appreciating nature's indifference can help to undercut what he calls 'delusions of self-importance' – not just the sense that one's personal projects are all-important, but anthropocentric hubris: the view that *human* projects trump all others. His aim in doing so is, accordingly, not to provoke a dispiriting sense of the ultimate meaninglessness of all of our activities and projects, but to engender a sense of humility in the face of 'the majesty of Being'. The person so struck will not be preoccupied with the question of how, if at all, her personal interests sit with respect to nature's lofty indifference. So, for example, she will not think that those interests coincide with those of nature writ large.[37] On the contrary, her self-interest will register hardly at all for her. Her gaze will be turned outwards.

6. The value of nature's indifference

It is not the case that just anyone, encountering nature's indifference in any sort of way, will be unselfed. As we saw, one needs to be able to see nature as manifestly indifferent. It's likely that one also needs to approach nature in the right sort of way – with, as Charles E. Scott suggests, a certain kind of attentiveness and receptivity, perhaps.[38] After all, a boastful and arrogant person who survives his encounter with the desert may well return from the place more boastful and arrogant than ever.

It may also matter whether or not one experiences nature's indifference at first-hand. It is unlikely that the desert fathers would have been unselfed by the desert if they had merely read about the place or heard tales about it from travellers. They were unselfed because they directly experienced it. Likewise, though it may be possible to be unselfed by images of deserts on TV,

actually being in the desert would, I suspect, work better. Indeed, more generally, it would seem that one needs directly to experience nature in all its lofty indifference if one is to stand a good chance of being unselfed by it.

One may also need to experience it from a place of safety. The tsunami on the horizon, the boulder hurtling down the hill in one's direction, the numbing shock of the cancer diagnosis – these are encounters with nature's indifference, but ones so terrifying as to impede unselfing. What is needed, it seems, is the safety that enables one to regard nature with disinterest – not complete disinterestedness, for then one could not take anything to be indifferent to one's own interests, but some measure of disinterestedness nonetheless.

So, provided that certain conditions are met, an observer may be unselfed by her encounters with nature's indifference. Such claims need to be handled with care, of course. Just as it would be insensitive to tell an ill person the truth that illness can be edifying, so it would be insensitive to harp on about the possible benefits of appreciating nature's indifference to those who are trying to recover from the effects of a tornado or an earthquake. In such circumstances, a good person's concern for others would either drown out or silence any thoughts about the therapeutic value of appreciating what John Stuart Mill called nature's 'callous indifference'.[39] Nonetheless, though more work would be needed to determine how *much* of an effect it can have, and on what sorts of people, it is plausible that appreciating nature's indifference *can* have a therapeutic effect. Hale, it appears, sees just part of the truth: in some cases, nature may be of value, not *despite* its indifference, but *because* of it.

Such things as vultures, deserts and limestone crags may indeed have a *special* value nowadays, precisely because they are manifestly indifferent. To see why, it may be helpful to consider two complementary tendencies. The following passage from Jonathan Franzen indicates the first:

> [T]he ultimate goal of technology, the telos of techne, is to replace a natural world that's indifferent to our wishes — a world of hurricanes and hardships and breakable hearts, a world of resistance — with a world so responsive to our wishes as to be, effectively, a mere extension of the self.[40]

Franzen seems to suggest that to make the world responsive to our wishes is to eliminate its indifference. That doesn't quite accord with how we have been using 'indifference' in this paper. In the sense of that word spelt out in Section 1, umbrellas, air-conditioning systems and all those other technological artefacts that render the world wish-responsive remain strongly indifferent to our interests. Even so, as such artefacts come to play larger and larger roles in our lives, nature's indifference becomes less and less *manifest* to us. Take central heating, for instance. In days gone by, nature's indifference would have loomed large in the lives of New Yorkers. It would have been evident in the freezing air pouring into their homes every winter. Nowadays, by contrast, many New Yorkers live in homes where the temperature can be precisely adjusted to suit not just their needs but also their tastes. Nature, in the form of wind, rain, sleet and snow, remains as indifferent now as it ever was; however, to those New Yorkers lucky enough to live in centrally-heated homes, its indifference is less manifest.

Granted, nature's indifference *sometimes* becomes manifest, even to those of us who live in highly user-friendly environments. Yet on those increasingly rare occasions when it does manifest itself, it tends to do so in circumstances which militate against unselfing. Consider a wealthy technophile who lives in the midst of a world precisely shaped to serve her interests. She watches news reports of tsunamis, volcanoes and earthquakes. But since she does not experience those manifestly indifferent phenomena directly, she is not unselfed. She isn't entirely insulated from indifferent nature, of course. Like anyone else, she sometimes catches a cold or a stomach bug. Yet on such occasions, she finds she cannot regard nature's indifference with the requisite disinterestedness. She is too caught up in sneezing or vomiting to contemplate the majesty of Being.

So, again, she is not unselfed. The wealthy technophile's encounters with nature's indifference tend to be neither direct nor sufficiently disinterested, so they tend not to inspire unselfing.[41]

This, then, is the first tendency to which I mean to draw attention: the fact (if fact it is) that as our technological control of our environments increases, we are afforded fewer and fewer opportunities to unself because we are afforded fewer and fewer opportunities to appreciate nature's indifference directly and with disinterest. The second tendency concerns narcissism, a personality trait characterised by 'a cognitive, affective, and motivational preoccupation with the self.'[42] Suppose that narcissism is a bad thing. And suppose that - as indeed numerous studies have reported - narcissism is on the rise, at least in certain demographics.[43] In such times, encounters with nature's manifest indifference might have a special value, precisely because they present us with opportunities to unself. Granted, empirical work would be needed to assess whether such encounters really *do* tend to have this effect. Moreover, it is unclear whether an *extreme* narcissist, still less someone who suffers from what is sometimes called narcissistic personality disorder, would be unselfed by their encounters with nature's indifference. (Such people typically hate to feel ignored by other people; perhaps they also hate to feel ignored by nature.) Nonetheless, it is at least plausible to suppose that those of us who are moderately narcissistic might benefit from such encounters. For those of us who spend our days passing from one air-conditioned space to another, eyes locked on our i-Phones – for those of us living in such resistanceless worlds, the manifestly indifferent entities we occasionally encounter might have a certain sort of therapeutic value precisely because they so obviously don't care about us.

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[1] Robert Elliot, *Faking Nature: The ethics of environmental restoration* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), p. 132.

[2] Eugene C. Hargrove appeals to nature's indifference to defend the claim that nature is always beautiful and never ugly. When nature creates, he suggests, it does not do so in accordance with any prior standards of beauty: its creating is 'indifferent' to such standards. Whatever is created in this way cannot therefore fall short of any aesthetic standard; on the contrary, Hargrove suggests, 'the

natural product of nature's indifferent creativity… is and has to be good and beautiful, because whatever is so created always brings with it compatible standards of goodness and beauty.' (*Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), p. 184.) In this paper, however, I am not concerned with the question of whether nature creates in one way or another. I ask whether nature – in Hargrove's terms, 'the natural product of nature's indifferent creativity' - cares about our interests.

[3] *The Wild and the Wicked: On Nature and Human Nature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), p. 12.

[4] Hale, *The Wild and the Wicked*, p. 3.

[5] Hale, *The Wild and the Wicked*, p. 94. Hale does not marshal these claims in support of an argument against protecting nature. Instead he develops an argument for protecting nature that does not include the premise that nature has value. In this paper, I do not appraise that argument, interesting though it is.

[6] George Simpson, 'Mother Nature is a Wicked Old Witch', in Matthew Nitecki and Doris Nitecki (eds.), *Evolutionary Ethics* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 217-232.

[7] On this distinction, see Gary E. Varner, *In Nature's Interests? Interests, Animal Rights, and Environmental Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 26.

[8] William Hasker, 'An Open Theist Theodicy of Natural Evil', in Ken Perszyk (ed.), *Molinism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 281-302, at p. 296. Compare Richard Kerridge, *Cold Blood: Adventures with Reptiles and Amphibians* (London: Vintage, 2014), p. 62.

[9] Hale, *The Wild and the Wicked*, p. 94, p. 112.

[10] Hurricane Wilma was the strongest Atlantic hurricane ever recorded. In October 2005 it caused devastation in the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico, Cuba and the US state of Florida.

[11] Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: a Season in the Wilderness* (London: Robin Clark Ltd, 1968), p. 267.

[12] On this distinction, see Hallvard Lillehammer, 'The Nature and Ethics of Indifference', *The Journal of Ethics* 21 (1) (2017): 17-35, at p. 2.

[13] To call something indifferent when it is *incapable* of caring might seem to involve a category error. In my view, though, one should not reject as confused claims that deserts (for example) are indifferent to our interests. It is, I believe, more fruitful to suppose that in such cases 'indifference' is used in an extended sense – and then to consider the implications of that use. That is what I try to do here.

[14] Two general observations about weak indifference. (1) Though an entity that is strongly indifferent is necessarily indifferent to everything, an entity can be weakly indifferent to the interests of just some entities – and it may be indifferent to just some of those entities' interests at any point in time.

For instance, Elaine may intrinsically care whether or not her son Jim is healthy, yet she may be weakly indifferent to whether or not Jim satisfies his interest in achieving a high score on his favourite computer game, and she may not care at all whether or not some other boy satisfies his interests. (2) Suppose that, ten minutes ago, I was not thinking about my friend or any of her interests. Does this mean that ten minutes ago I was weakly indifferent to my friend's interests? It does not. Caring whether someone's interests are satisfied must be cashed out in dispositional terms. To say that I intrinsically care about my friend's interests in being happy is not to say that I am constantly thinking about her happiness. Amongst other things, it is to say that I would react in certain ways were I to hear that she is unhappy.

[15] Some will challenge claims to the effect that such entities are in this sense natural. Such challenges are sometimes warranted: deserts, for example, can be created by unwise agricultural practices. For present purposes, though, I set these complications aside. So if the reader is unconvinced that hurricanes or deserts qualify as natural, in this sense of 'natural', then I would ask her either to assume, for argument's sake, that they *are* natural, or to substitute an example of something that strikes her as being natural.

[16] In some cases, though, it seems reasonable to locate the indifference, not in the artefact itself, but in those humans who manufactured it, distributed it or put it to use. Take land mines. They are inimical to human life, yet we don't tend to see them as being manifestly indifferent to us and our interests. And if we *do* see them as such, we are likely to see that indifference as nothing more than a reflection of the indifference of those who make, sell or use the objects.

[17] Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 168.

[18] Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 111.

[19] Once again, we are dealing with tendencies here, rather than necessary and sufficient conditions. For example, some human artefacts may well persist long after *Homo sapiens* is extinct, and so may seem manifestly indifferent. The Onkalo spent nuclear fuel repository in Finland, for instance, has been designed to keep nuclear waste for 100,000 years. And even a city can seem manifestly indifferent to one who sees it as having a life of its own, unaffected by the interests of its human inhabitants.

[20] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 120. Thoreau usually isn't so soppy. Consider, by way of contrast, his descriptions of nature as 'vast and dread and inhuman', a realm with which 'Man was not to be associated' (*The Maine Woods*. Edited by Joseph J.

Moldenhauer with an introduction by Paul Theroux (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 70.)

[21] 'Can and Ought We to Follow Nature?' *Environmental Ethics* 1 (1979): 7-30, at p. 28. See also, Holmes Rolston III, 'Disvalues in Nature', *The Monist* 75 (2) (1992): 250-78, at pp. 266-8.

[22] *The Human Predicament: A candid guide to life's biggest questions* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 203.

[23] Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity, 3rd ed.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), p. 339.

[24] Donald A. Crosby, *A Religion of Nature* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), p. 139.

[25] Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel, 1900-1930* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 105.

[26] Val Plumwood, 'Comment: Self-realization or Man Apart? The Reed-Naess Debate', in Nina Witoszek and Andrew Brennan (eds.), *Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Naess and the Progress of Ecophilosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), pp. 206- 212, at pp. 208-9.

[27] For an interesting defence of the position, see E. J. Lowe, 'A Defence of Non-Cartesian Substance Dualism', in Alessandro Antonietti, Antonella Corradini and E. Jonathan Lowe (eds.), *Psycho-Physical Dualism Today: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008), pp. 167-184.

[28] Jan W. Fennema and Iain Paul (eds.) *Science and Religion: One World – Changing Perspectives on Reality* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1990), p. 135.

[29] Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity* (London: Collins, 1972), p. 160.

[30] Mary Midgley, 'Criticizing the Cosmos', in Willem B. Drees (ed.), *Is Nature Ever Evil? Religion, Science, and Value* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 11-26, at p. 15.

[31] Kerridge, *Cold Blood*, p. 62. His worries are not groundless. Though William James did not portray nature as disenchanted, he did hold that 'Visible nature', precisely because it 'is all plasticity and indifference', is 'a harlot' to whom 'we owe no allegiance; with her as a whole we can establish no moral communion; and we are free in our dealing with her several parts to obey or to destroy, and to follow no law but that of prudence in coming to terms with such of her particular features as will help us to our private ends.' ('Is Life Worth Living?' in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy and Human Immortality* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896), pp. 43-44.) (It is interesting to note the various ways that those party to debates about nature's indifference portray nature – as a mother, a witch or (here) a harlot. I won't explore assumptions about sex and gender that seem to underlie these choices of expression here. For a good introduction, see Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (Abingdon, Routledge, 1996).

[32] Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, p. 168.

[33] Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, p. 53.

[34] See Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1971), p. 82. Could encountering the manifest indifference of other people have a similar effect? In some cases, perhaps it could; but this is, I think, unlikely to be its usual effect. Suppose that one is faced with the manifest indifference of some entity, x. If x is a tornado, mountain or vulture, then there is little sense in asking, in an aggrieved tone, why it is indifferent to one's interests. By contrast, if x is another human person, then such questions do not just make sense but would seem naturally to be invited. 'Why,' one might ask oneself, 'does x seem not to care about me? Am I worth so little in x's eyes?' Asking such questions would, I suspect, tend to both reflect and foster certain self-centred thoughts and feelings – they would tend, that is, to have a 'selfing' rather than unselfing effect.

[35] 'The Human Prejudice', in A. W Moore (ed.), *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 135-152, at pp. 137-8. For a possible example of such belittling, see Colin McGinn's claim that it 'is consoling to reflect that from a cosmic standpoint none of it really matters all that much, even our own death. It is something of a relief to recall that all those too-human problems don't objectively count for much.' ('Review of Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*', *Mind* 96 (1987): 263-272, at p. 272.)

[36] Derek Parfit is an example of one person who was unconvinced by Williams' reasoning on this point. See *On What Matters, Volume Two* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 443.

[37] So this unselfing should not be conceived of as a form of what Warwick Fox, following Abraham Maslow, called transpersonal identification. (See further, Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

[38] Charles E. .Scott, *Living with Indifference* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 159.

[39] *Three Essays on Religion: Nature, the Utility of Religion, and Theism, 2nd ed*. London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1912), p. 30. On Mill's views on the topic of nature, see Piers H. G. Stephens, 'On the Nature of "Nature"', *Environmental Ethics* 37 (3) (2015): 359-76.

[40] 'Liking Is for Cowards. Go for What Hurts' (*New York Times*, 28 May, 2011) (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/29/opinion/29franzen.html?src=ISMR_AP_LI_LST_FB)

[41] Virginia Woolf expresses a different view. To fall ill, she suggests, is to be afforded an opportunity to become 'disinterested' enough to appreciate natural phenomena such as the 'divinely heartless' sky or the 'indifference' of flowers ('On Being Ill', *The New Criterion* 4 (1) (1926): 32-45, at pp. 36-38). That may sometimes be true. In most cases, however, the ill person is, I suspect, likely to be too preoccupied by other things (such as pain) to be impressed by nature's indifference.

[42] Alan E. Kazdin, *Encyclopedia of Psychology, Volume 5* (Washington DC. And New York, NY: American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 377. For a brief review of the ongoing debate about how to characterise the phenomenon, see Irving B. Weiner and W. Edward Craighead (eds.), *The Corsini Encylopedia of Psychology, Volume 3* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010), pp. 1051-2.

[43] See, for instance, Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York, NY: Atria, 2009), Introduction.